

# Simmons 'frustrated' with recognition process

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*Gannett News Service*

WASHINGTON — Rep. Rob Simmons said he was "completely frustrated" after an hour-long meeting Tuesday with Interior Secretary Gale A. Norton on how her agency grants federal recognition to Indian tribes.

Simmons, R-2nd District, described the meeting between Norton and the three Republican members of Connecticut's congressional delegation as "a heated discussion" that produced no results.

He said he had hoped the meeting would address recent reports in the Hartford Courant saying the Bureau of Indian Affairs granted recognition to the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation of western Connecticut even though the tribe, which wants to open casino, didn't meet

all the necessary criteria.

"At the very least, I felt that we should have a moratorium on recognitions until some of the allegations of malfeasance have been looked into, but we were not accommodated on that in any way," Simmons said.

A spokesman for the Interior Department could not be reached for comment.

U.S. Sen. Christopher Dodd, D-Conn., has expressed concerns that the BIA seems to act less quickly on recognition petitions from tribes that have no plans to open a casino, while tribes with backing from deep-pocketed investors who want to open a casino are put on a fast track.

Dodd was working to set up another meeting Thursday with Norton on the tribal recognition issue and planned to invite the entire seven-member congressional delegation, spokeswoman Ryan McGinn said.

The House Resources Committee, which has jurisdiction over Indian issues, is scheduled to hold a hearing today to explore prob-

lems with the recognition process and alternatives for improving it.

Dodd and Sen. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., also have asked the Senate Indian Affairs Committee to hold hearings on the issue, Lieberman spokeswoman Casey Aden-Wansbury said.

Obtaining federal recognition is a first step for tribes seeking to enter the lucrative Indian casino industry.

The issue heated up for Connecticut in 2002, when the Bureau of Indian Affairs decided to merge the Eastern Pequot and Paucabuck Eastern Pequot tribes, creating a single entity known as the Historic Eastern Pequot Tribe. The tribe has said it plans to open a third casino in southeastern Connecticut.

The issue gained urgency in

January when the BIA granted recognition to the Schaghticoke, creating the possibility of another Indian casino.

But changing the tribal recognition process is a tough sell in Congress. The Senate voted 80-15 in September 2002 to reject a proposal from Dodd and Lieberman to put a moratorium on BIA recognition decisions until the federal government makes changes requested by the senators.

Dodd and Lieberman have proposed legislation that would require the BIA to notify a larger number of people when a tribe petitions for federal recognition. The proposal also would make it easier for a tribe's neighbors to influence a recognition decision and would require that tribes seeking recognition meet specific criteria.



Simmons